ABSTRACT

TOWARDS BUDDHIST SOCIAL WORK AND HAPPINESS

Not only be one of the crucial bases for accomplishing merit, but “social work” is one of the names for “happiness” — that is, the “meritorious deed” in the Buddha’s discourses or suttas as well. With a long distance to its origin, social work, in its first reference as dāna (giving), was expressed in the Buddha’s time as a spiritual force for the creation of social conditions favourable to tackle such critical social dukkha (problems) as poverty, hunger, wars and the suffering resulting from these problems. And after more than 2,600 years, these same old problems have continued, together with new social problems and risks. In the turn of the twentieth century tendency, however, are emerging such social-environmental-economic development crises along with those problems as ecological catastrophe, environmental degradation, climate change, human trafficking, drugs, and recently the paradox of happiness of people in the developed nations — for the current economic situation does not really make their citizen happy, although the countries have succeeded much in industrialization and modernization guided by the “pursuit of happiness,” an efficient economic ideology in search of an affluent and good ‘welfare state’ of Homo economicus of the mainstream economic paradigm. This paper, in quest for solutions relevant to those contemporary problems, analyzes their causes and
Toward Buddhist Social Work and Happiness

considers the ‘Buddhist social work” as a vital path in pursuing genuine happiness via the Buddhist economics of happiness standpoints.

*Keywords*: Social work, Buddhist economics, *Homo economicus*, Happiness paradox

---

**FIRST DRAFT**

**TOWARDS BUDDHIST SOCIAL WORK AND HAPPINESS**

Dr. Soontaraporn Techapalokul, Ph.D.
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University
Wangnoi, Ayutthaya, Thailand
E-mail: techapal@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Not solely one of the crucial bases for accomplishing merit, social work is one of the names for ‘happiness,’ that is—puñña—the “meritorious action” in the Buddha’s discourses or *sutta* as well. As a so-called ‘the good,’ social work is a common aim of all Buddhists and a ‘method’ or ‘means’ to an end goal of life—that is, ‘happiness’. Nonetheless, happiness is not always the good, while the good is certainly happiness, according to the Buddhist ethics. Although impermanent and liable to change, happiness of social work causes the seekers more benefits than threats.

On the contrary, happiness of *Homo economicus*, the economic man, although transient, changeable, and worldly the same nature as that of social work, it causes the seekers more threats than benefits. It arises when want or craving (*taṇhā*) is satisfied; it is unfinished or boundless; and can lead a community and society to social and economic injustice, political corruption, poverty, hunger, financial crises, climate change, and environmental deterioration. In short, happiness of *Homo economicus* and its pursuit always ends up with unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). Also, it can appear as the societal suffering due to the seekers’ unlimited want and their inabilities to see happiness as it really is.

And after more than 2,600 years, the individual and social *dukkha* have continued and recently lead to the paradox of happiness in the developed nations—for the current economic situation does not really make their citizen happy, although the countries have succeeded much in modernization guided by sciences and technology. The “pursuit of happiness,” an efficient economic
ideology is used in search for an affluent or good ‘welfare state’ of the mainstream economic paradigm. In quest for the policy relevant to solve those structural problems, this article analyzes the causes of such social-economic problems and considers the Buddhist social work as the path for human pursuing right happiness through the Buddhist economics of happiness standpoints.

2. History of Social Work

With a long distance to its origin, social work was in its first reference as dāna (generosity, charity) and veyyāvacca (offering the service). Both meanings were expressed in the Buddha’s time as spiritual force for the creation of social conditions favourable to tackle the critical social dukkha (problems) such as wars (among states), poverty, hunger, and the suffering resulting from these problems. According to the traditional story, such distinguished individuals as Sudatta-Anāthapiṇḍika1 and Visākhā (Migāra’s Mother);2 who situated at the upper class of society and very wealthy, as well as Suppiyā,3 and Ugga of Hatthī village,4 all choose to follow the spiritual path and became the noble ones through ‘generosity’ and ‘rendering the service’.

Hence, the history of philosophical idea of eastern social work must begin with the great contribution of the Buddha. The Blessed One understands the major cause of social problems within the individual. By focusing on the individual, even though he also knows how much culture and the structure of society (class system) have influence upon individuals; his Dhamma can cure the social problems of his time.5 This is because to serve a society in a real and long term is difficult, if the person is devoid of ‘individual development’. Therefore, the Buddha urged his sixty disciples who had attained the arahantship to travel from village to village, city to city, to teach his Dhamma6 to people for their welfare and happiness:

2 Ibid., [(g) Lay-follower, women], p. 24.— Visākhā (Migāra’s Mother), the lay-follower, chief among women disciples who minister to the Order (and of performing dāna).
3 Ibid., p. 25.— Suppiyā, the lay-follower, (praised by the Buddha), chief (etadagga) among women disciples who nurse the sick.
4 Ibid., [(f) Lay-follower, men], p. 23.— Ugga of Hatthī village, the householder, chief among disciples who give pleasant gifts.
5 This is evidenced by some major indications told by King Pasenadi of Kosala in the Dhammacetiya Sutta that the king praises and thanks the Buddha of his Dhamma which have brought peace and happiness to his country.— I.B. Horner (tr.), Majjhima-nikāya: The Middle Length Sayings, vol. 2, (no. 11), [89: Dhammacetiya Sutta], pp. 298-302.
6 The word dhamma (Sk. dharma) has several definitions. The most common are: teaching (as contained in the scriptures), Ultimate Truth (to which the teachings point), law, doctrine, nature, phenomenon, and a discrete ‘moment’ of life, seen as it really is.— Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto (Phra
Walk, monks, on tour for the blessing of the manyfolk, for the happiness of the manyfolk out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of devas and men. Let not two (of you) go by one (way) Monks, teach dhamma which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the ending. Explain with the spirit and the letter the Brahma-faring completely fulfilled, wholly pure.  

Those suggestive words not only instigate the strategic age of social work in the world, but also signify the first Buddhist thought of the kind of social work and duty in a humanitarian sense that is found in the sacred history of humankind.

3. **Homo economicus: The Economic Man**

As mentioned earlier that early social work (both in the East and West) has its main focus and origin in ‘poverty’ and its economic and social consequential problems such as disease, lack of education, prostitutes, crime, etc. Actually, these problems are closely linked to notion of *homo economicus*: the economic man of western mainstream economics of capitalism ideology. *Homo economicus* who is always rational, self-interested, and stresses on individualistic preferences via his/her ‘pursuit of happiness’ is one of the most important and powerful tenets of the Neoclassical Economics.

This humanistic model was thought to be proposed by John Stuart Mill in 1836. In Mill’s opinion, the economic man is “solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.” Such a ‘desire’ is ‘unlimited want’ or ‘self-interest’ in a human’s nature, although it is nothing new, it can appear in the position of power and control over humanity, natural resources, economic and political systems.

Due to Venerable Buddhadāsa, the human desire is *tanha* or craving that has many dimensions. In addition to the three levels on which it operates, craving disturbs the mind in three basic directions or ways: “There is the desire to get, have, possess, and enjoy material things. There is the desire to be this, to be that, to become somebody or something. And there is the desire to not be, to no

---


Toward Buddhist Social Work and Happiness

longer exist, to be annihilated, to become nothing.”

Craving then has many ways to disturb the mind and ruin its ‘natural ecology’—the spiritual realm of mindfulness and wisdom—that has no chance of being healthy.

Additionally, as the institutional structure, David Brandon argues:

These cravings have become cemented into all forms of social structures and institutions...These structures and their protective institutions continue to exacerbate and amplify the basic human inequalities in housing, health care, education and income. They reward and encourage greed, selfishness, and exploitation rather than love, sharing and compassion. Certain people’s life styles, characterised by greed and over-consumption, become dependent on the deprivation of the many. The oppressors and oppressed fall into the same trap of continual craving.

As a product of the economic and social theories that support capitalist society, the *Homo economicus* model is a basis on which modern economic theories are built as well. The model ensures an individual’s free will to pursue one’s own interests. It also deeply rooted in the East with the West tradition of capitalism. People in such a model seem only think, as affluence creeps in, that they can become happy if they get their desires fulfilled. As GDP swells, thus, their lives turn around cash; they worship money. Many Asians and developed countries fall into such a pursuit of happiness (material wealth).

Although achieved much, capitalism does not actually make people happy because the life of *homo economicus* is paradoxical in many senses. The greater quantity of happiness (goods and services) they pursue, the fewer amount of utility and life satisfaction they obtain. This implies: “getting what ones want does not always lead to wanting what ones get (getting)”. All these paradoxical phenomena can be realized only by the wise that happiness is transient (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*); one only suffers from it, when one expects it to satisfy oneself.

Thus, the economic man, when reach the societal level, reacts efficiently to the tremendous economic and political pressure from the forceful capitalist-driven ideology. People acquire more power, more materials, and become caught up in boundless routines of “getting more and spending more”. They exploit others, and destroy the ecology and nature for ages—undoubtedly, devoted to “happiness” which is not that far from ‘money’. These irrational behavior and selfishness (craving) have instigated new social problems and risks, for instance, human trafficking, children on/of the street, family violence, family violence,

---


Toward Buddhist Social Work and Happiness

drug abuse and juvenile justice, that emerged in Thailand and the ASEAN since the 1990s. Absolutely, they expand the demand for social work—such as to create more ecosystem restoration program, open more homeless program, release more refugee resettlement program, build more mental hospitals, open more drug rehabilitation programs, etc.

All problems have human desire, in the old-time view, selfishness, as an origin. So, why do we not get rid of it? or, why do we not reject the use of the homo economicus as an analytical tool?

4. The Western Social Work

Social work in the western society, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “any of various professional activities or methods concretely concerned with providing social services and especially with the investigation, treatment, and material aid of the economically, physically, mentally, or socially disadvantaged. Although it has been a humanistic social action since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, social work these days concerns various procedural forms and reports to characterize ways of relieving suffering and enhancing people well-being, rather than direct interacting with clients or the needy.

According to Soydan,12 the theoretical idea of social work initiates with the contribution of two classical theorists: Mary Richmond (1917)13 who seeks the main causes of social problems within the individual by focusing on the individual in order to remedy social problems; and Jane Addams (1902, 1960)14 who focuses on the structure and culture of society and their influence upon the individual.

Nowadays, social work in the West is: “A business agency with the highly procedural forms. Its organization and education are subordinated to and transformed by the imperatives of managerialism.”15 In other words, it is the job done by someone who works for a government or private organization that helps people who have financial or family problems.16 Nevertheless, this nature of the

agencies has worsened the true spirit of social work. As it frustrated the workers with a barrage of forms that their work currently took:

We are now much more office based...The whole team was in the office working at their desks. We have loads more forms which take time to complete. But we social workers also do less and less direct work with clients. Increasingly the agency buys in other people to do the direct work and we manage it.17

Another worker condensed the frustration, this:
I feel so deskillled because there are so many restrictions over what I can do. Yes I go out and do assessments, draw up care plans, but then we aren't allowed to do anything. I can't even go and organise meals on wheels for somebody without completing a load of paperwork, submitting a report to a load of people who would then make the decision as to whether I can go ahead and make the arrangements. I just wonder why I am doing this. It's not social work.18

Although stresses on ‘poverty’ as its birth, the social work in western tradition and the rise of its philosophical idea are greatly different from the eastern economic world's.

5. Towards Buddhist Social Work: An Analysis

In eastern tradition, that is to say—Buddhism—social work is defined as ‘happiness’ or ‘human flourishing’. It is an action which is said to be ‘good’ or ‘right’ when it has tendency to augment happiness and welfare or well-being of the community or society. Not only be synonymous to human happiness, social work is an ‘advantage’ or ‘boon’ (puñña) stated in the Aṅguttara-nikāya by the Buddha, this: “Monks, be not afraid of deeds of merit. It is the name for happiness, that is, meritorious deeds.”19

The Blessed One has also restated such meritorious deeds to an angel named ‘Lāja’ to be pursued and done repeatedly since its result is happiness: “If a person were to do good, he should do it again and again; let him delight in it. The accumulation of good is happiness.”20 Based on such the Teaching, happiness of one who performs social work (its quality) is totally opposed to that of Homo

---

18 ibid., p. 100.
19 E.M. Hare (tr.), Aṅguttara-nikāya, vol. 4, (no. 21), [The Book of the Sevens, v, § ix a (59a): Amity], p. 54. (A 6,54)
economicus that arises when want is satisfied; it is unfinished; and ends up with suffering due to its impermanent and non-self nature.

As a task that takes the good of society, the Buddhist social work constitutes “human flourishing” as the core of “human happiness” which is subscribed to its philosophy. As it is evidenced by the Buddha after his enlightenment encouraged his 60 disciples who were the Arahants to serve a society for the benefit and happiness of the greatest number of people. As a task that takes the good of society, the Buddhist social work constitutes “human flourishing” as the core of “human happiness” which is subscribed to its philosophy. As it is evidenced by the Buddha after his enlightenment encouraged his 60 disciples who were the Arahants to serve a society for the benefit and happiness of the greatest number of people.21 His action not only explains the value of social work and benevolence, but also expounds social work as a ‘duty’ that must be guided by Dhamma. And his Dhamma that becomes a primary axis for cultivating virtue is defined as morality (sīla), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). The threefold not only can treat the ills of life: greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha), but also enable people to live their lives properly and do not harm others.

In the pursuit of (ordinary) happiness, there are ten virtuous actions defined as the ‘Ten-Bases of Meritorious Actions’ (dasa-puñnakiriyāvatthu).22 The Pāli, Dasa-puñnakiriyāvatthu, composed of four small words: dasa (ten) + puñña (merit) + kiriyā (action, deed) + vatthu (bases, ways) that is rendered the ‘Ten-Bases of Meritorious Action’. All ten-bases are the Buddhist practical, peaceful action of attaining the right ‘worldly happiness’—a kind of ‘feeling good’ (sukha-vedanā). Puñña (Sk. punya) is a popular term for wholesome (kusala) action.

The Ten-Bases of Meritorious Action, in group, are called as the ‘Three-Bases of Meritorious Actions’ (tīṇi-puñnakiriyāvatthu)23 that can be applied to explain humans’ behaviour and societies. The three-bases are identified as: generosity (dāna), morality (sīla), and mental development (bhāvanā)—that is, the triad of volitional deeds. They can not solely produce good effects, but also give social workers the highest blessing called maṅgala or “the auspicious”.24

Also, the triad can provide a strong foundation for the higher levels of Dhamma—that is, “the Threefold Training” (ti-sikkhā)—namely, morality (sīla), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). They are the core of which involves the good practice called Ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga (the

22 Pe Maung Tin (tr.), Aṭṭhasālinī Aṭṭhakathā: The Expositor (Buddhagosa’s Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī), vol. 1-2, (no. 48), p. 209.
Noble Eightfold Path)—to perform in a firm and secure manner. All in all, these two levels of Dhamma: the three-bases and the threefold are inter-correlated.

The three-bases and ten-bases are defined in Tipiṭaka, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three Bases of Meritorious Action</th>
<th>Ten Bases of Meritorious Action (Merit acquired by…)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Generosity (Dāna )</td>
<td>1) Dānamaya: generosity, giving, sharing material things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Pattidānamaya: sharing others in merit or good deeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Pattānumodanāmaya: rejoicing in others’ merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Morality (Sīla )</td>
<td>4) Sīlamaya: observing the precepts or moral conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5) Veyyāvaccamaya: rendering services and assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6) Apacāyanamaya: respecting the elders, the holy ones; and honoring others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mental Development (Bhāvanā )</td>
<td>7) Bhāvanāmaya: mental development (meditation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8) Dharmmassavanamaya: listening to the Teachings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9) Dhammadesanāmaya: instructing others the Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10) Diṭṭhujukamma: straitening one’s own views in accord with the Teachings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remark: For Diṭṭhujukamma, it is not fixed to be with the third group. It can be with any one of those three groups.—Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto, Dictionary of Buddhism, [89], (B.E. 2551 / 2008), pp. 93-94.

According to the ten-bases, only two of them, dāna and veyyāvaccca, which imply to society and social work are taken into consideration.

5.1 Dāna

The Pāli dāna is derived from the root dā as in dadāti “to give” and in dāti, dyāti, meaning “to deal out”. Thus, dāna is defined as giving, generosity, dealing out, gift, almsgiving, liberality, and munificence, especially, a charitable give to the community of bhikkhus, the Saṅgha.26

25 That is evidenced by the saying of the Buddha to Venerable Ānanda, “What is that good practice? It is the Noble Eightfold Path … which leads to complete disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.”— I.B. Horner (tr.), Majjhima-nikāya: The Middle Length Sayings, vol. 2, (no. 11), [83: Makkhādeva Sutta, par. 2], p.272 (M 83.21)

Dāna in the Buddha’s time was social activities/actions made distinctly by seṭṭhī, the rich householder, who is comparable to a ‘capitalist’ (Thai: nai-thun นายทุน) in our modern Western world. However, the value gaining from their ‘generosity career’ is dissimilar. Venerable Buddhāsa once explained the difference:

A seṭṭhī is a wealthy person who uses his/her accumulated wealth to build a rong-than [โรงทาน] for the sake of social welfare. The status of seṭṭhī was measured by the number of their rong-thans. It is an almshouse or a communal place where the poor could come and receive what they lacked materially...The more rong-than one had, and the wealthier one was considered to be.27

In such a way, generosity a seṭṭhī performed implies a great deal of load of social work he/she did through building and operating numerous rong-thans. Also, the wealth he/she properly obtained and used has been seen as a ‘sign of virtue’ and ‘happiness’ or a ‘gift’ for themselves and everyone. His/her generosity not only creates opportunities to benefit the greatest number of people, but also being used as the solution to help the needy provide for their basic needs, material things, and well-being. By cultivating generosity or dāna, those seṭṭhī can develop “non-attachment” to their wealth and property—as the ‘special wealth’ they gain in return as well as become the ‘enlightened being’. In other words, value of money and economic wealth they earned cannot be compared to the supreme goal of enlightenment and cannot obstruct them to follow the spiritual path via social work called dāna.

On the contrary, “a capitalist,” according to Venerable Buddhadasa, “is a wealthy person who keeps accumulating material wealth far beyond what he or she really needs.”28 In reality, much money and ‘surplus’ in capitalist society usually feed over-consumption and capital accumulation. This causes consumerism and the pursuit of happiness or self-interest of homo economicus to grow: the more one buys and has; the more one wants. This tendency has gradually aggravated the real Buddhist concept of dāna to ‘quantity’ or ‘things’ that can be compared.

Thus, a capitalist today understands dāna as making merit in terms of money.29 This understanding, however, is not for moving people out of poverty to increase his/her freedom and peace of mind as the seṭṭhī in former time did. Often, he/she donates money for ‘status survival’ and for ‘prestige-oriented comparisons with others’. In such a manner, dāna is no longer an act of social work as its sense of circulating puñña (boon) as ‘the gift’ from social work is being lost, while attachment to

---

28 ibid.
29 Dāna (generosity) is not confined to the donation of money and material things. It embraces such various forms as teaching, training, helping, working, giving, organizing services, political; environmental; or natural disastrous actions, etc.
‘self’ and ‘wealth,’ alienation, individualism, and selfishness enlarge. This stimulates social and economic injustice as well as prolonged poverty.

5.2 Veyyāvacca

The Pāli, veyyāvacca, and Sanskrit Vaiyā + prtya from vyāprta means “active” or “busy”. It was later translated into Pāli-Sanskrit as vaiyāvrtya [as vi +ā+vr] means service, attention, rendering a service; work, labour, commission, or duty.30 This paper prefers using the translation of veyyāvacca as ‘rendering the service’.

Theravāda Buddhism seems to think that an individual without ‘mental development’ or ‘self-cultivation’ is not easy to serve a society or ‘render the service’ in a real meaning of term. In other words, social work must be rooted in sīla (morality). And, the ‘cultivation of sīla’ must be observed at the same time, or even before the person does rendering social service, or else he/she might fail or corrupt his/her social duty.

The Five Precepts are basic Buddhist sīla. The Precepts are one kind of social work taken upon in order to abstain from some types of actions. They signify relationships and activities that do not take advantage of anyone, and that are for the mutual benefit of oneself, others, and the public. Besides, the Precepts advise to people how ‘the wise’ behaves ahead of any sense of ‘self’ and selfishness. Moreover, “The Precepts invite us to loosen the grip, unclench the fist, and to aspire to open-handedness and open-heartedness. Whether, and to what extent, he keeps the Precepts is the responsibility of each individual.”31

Sati (mindfulness), furthermore, is a key instrumental Dhamma for ‘mental development’ (bhāvanā) aside from the practice of dāna (generosity) and sīla (morality). Regarding Venerable Payutto:32 “Sati (mindfulness) aids the arising of wisdom (paññā). It helps the mind not to fall into the past or float into the future with delight and aversion, but seeing things as they are.” Pertaining to the

Towards Buddhist Social Work and Happiness

Čūḷavedalla Sutta, the practice, the development and the cultivation of mindfulness through its four foundations is also the development of concentration (samādhi) therein.³³

When seeing the Dhamma and things ‘as they really are,’ from the training of insight, ones see the existence of themselves and things; they are related to each others by the law of paṭiccasamuppāda (Dependent Origination). Ones voluntarily work for the welfare and happiness of others as the work ones performed have tendency to augment puñña (boon) or happiness and gains of societies. They then realizes the higher meaning of social work that means ‘mind(ful) training’—the practice of Dhamma.

Those will bring them to the true nature of worldly and spiritual life that enables them to realize impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self (anicca, dukkha, and anattā)—the three qualities stated as the ‘beneficial’ (sappāya) for nibbāna—the supreme happiness.³⁴ Hence, the social worker is unperturbed by gain or lost, fame or defame, praise or blame, and sorrow or (ordinary) happiness. This is the highest form of veyyāvacca, rendering the service, in the Buddhist social work.

6. Conclusion

The Buddhist social work is an action that is no longer developed in the context of homo economicus—where his/her behaviour is driven by self-interest or selfishness. The philosophy of Buddhist social work has to deal inter-dependently among individuals, the economy, ecology/environment, society, and morality—that is for the individual and social transformation. Its idea is based on awareness-understanding of inter-dependence among individuals and those surrounding systems—which all are in unity. Besides, it needs to work together, care for each other, make sacrifices, let go of ‘self’ and give up self-interests for the sake of Dhamma, the welfare of others, the happiness of the greatest number of people, and finally, the good of society.

---

³⁴ F.L. Woodward (tr.), Saṁyutta-nikāya: Book of Kindred Sayings, vol. 4 (Saḷāyatana Vagga), (no. 16), [Ch. xxxv, iii, 5, § 146 (2): Helpful (i)], p. 86.